

As early as the end of the nineteenth century warehousemen were in great demand in the Port of Hamburg. They were experts in the storage of high-value goods from across the whole world. Their workplaces were on the floors of the Speicherstadt, or warehouse city. There the jute sacks, filled almost to overflowing with coffee, cocoa and nuts, were cleaned, refined and stored on behalf of Hamburg merchants. A typical working day was long and physically very demanding. The sacks weighing anything up to 100 kilos were frequently literally shouldered – up to 1,000 sacks per day. The warehouseman’s work now looks back over a 300-year tradition that despite increasing digital change still flourishes in the Port of Hamburg today.

The profession of warehouseman surfaced for the first time in the 17th Century. It experienced a boom from 1888, when the Customs Union with the German Empire led to the formation of Hamburg Freeport, with warehouses being set up beyond the Customs stations. Speicherstadt came into being. Kept dry and at appropriate temperatures, in this massive warehouse complex, high value commodities including coffee, tea, cocoa, nuts, dry fruit and spices were stored and picked until the middle of the 20th century. The warehouseman’s job was wide-ranging. The independent warehouse keepers took on the complete handling of cargo imports

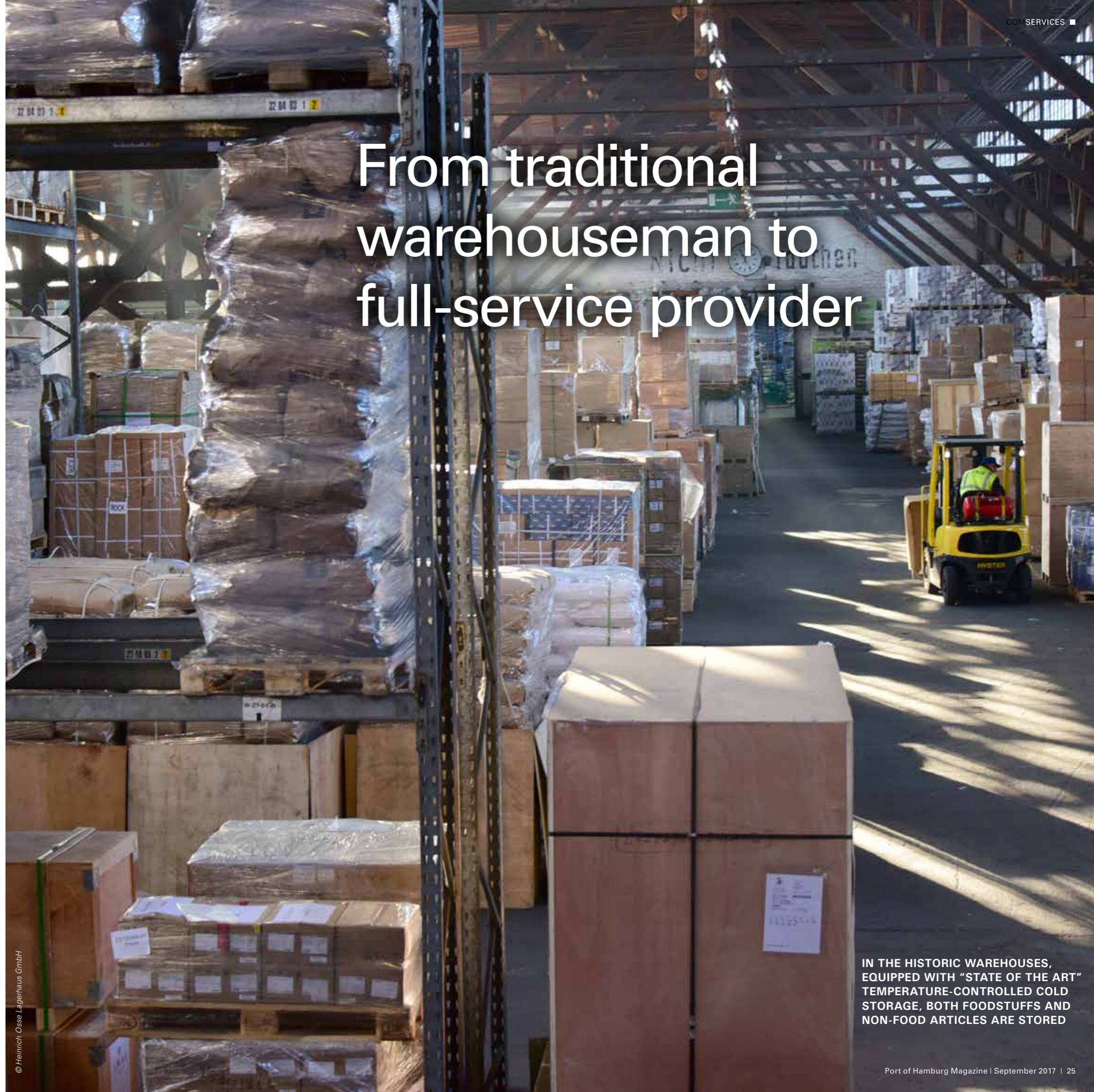
on behalf of the merchants, from checking and judging quality, to processing, storage and on-carriage to the customer. At the end of the 1960s, with the onset of containerisation, the demands on this traditional group of professions changed increasingly. In the course of time, extensive warehouses replaced the cramped floors stacked vertically in the Speicherstadt’s

historic buildings. The cargo was now to be stored in modern, air-conditioned and partly automated premises: The physically very demanding work would now be handled using mechanical support.

Today, just as previously for more than 130 years, the Hamburg warehousemen stand at an important interface of the import chain for food commodities. They are modern port logistics specialists providing an even greater range of services for the food industry and import trade. Even today, they are mainly small to mid-sized companies, where customers often have direct contact to the owner, profiting from short decision-making paths and low administration costs.

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From traditional warehouseman to full-service provider



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IN THE HISTORIC WAREHOUSES, EQUIPPED WITH “STATE OF THE ART” TEMPERATURE-CONTROLLED COLD STORAGE, BOTH FOODSTUFFS AND NON-FOOD ARTICLES ARE STORED



WHETHER FRESH, DRIED OR PROCESSED, THE CONDITION OF THE GOODS IS REGULARLY CHECKED AND DOCUMENTED BY WAREHOUSE STAFF

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A perfect example is Heinrich Osse Lagerhaus warehousing. This family business started in 1879 with trading and transporting fruit from Altes Land on the River Elbe. In 1985, the company moved to the "Fifties sheds" in the heart of the Freeport. The quay sheds built in around 1910 towards the end of the Wilhelmine era are today listed buildings, providing a wonderful contrast to the modern temperature-controlled warehouses inside. "Many of our customers are perplexed when they see the old quay sheds for the first time," says Peter Osse with a smile. He is head of the family business, the fourth generation in the trading, warehousing and logistics sectors. "Our customers from the food industry place very high demands on the storage of their commodities. From the temperature to humidity, every detail is prescribed. But, the moment they come into the warehouse, they know that their produce is in good hands." Apart from goods from the non-food area that make up almost 80 percent of the business, in the 20,000 square metres of warehousing, food has always been stored and packed. "From the beginning my great-grandfather's heart was in fruit: We continue the tradition with real enthusiasm." Whether tropical fruit or home-grown fruit and vegetables, chocolate or nuts – dried or fresh food are stored under optimal climatic conditions between -1°C and +25°C on an area of 3,200 square metres, distributed across four temperature-controlled and cold storage warehouses.

For ten years, the company has been "Bio" and IFS certified. "That's essential," explains Osse. "The certificates entitle us to store ecological products from the agro-industry, certifying that we comply with diverse international guidelines for the warehousing of foodstuffs." Food and product safety, coupled with transparency along the entire supply chain have been gaining ever more significance for both importers and end-consumers. "The increasing demands do have an impact on our administrative work," states Osse, but the 32 company staff take this in their stride. Many of them have been in the game for over 20 years – Peter Osse affectionately calls them "old stagers" with excellent knowledge of their products. When it comes to manpower the CEO becomes thoughtful. Like him, many warehouse operators are fighting an increasing lack of skilled staff. Even though the company provides vocational training in forwarding, warehousing and port and warehouse logistics, interested applicants are hardly to be found. New blood is being desperately sought. "In the warehousing, logistics and forwarding sectors we offer our customers a comprehensive one-stop service," explains Osse. "Our customers tell us what to do, and we do it." This 50-year-old no longer sees himself as a classic warehouse keeper, but rather as a wide-ranging service provider in the distribution chain. But one

thing cannot be denied, the work processes are very much as they were 120 years ago. Diverse goods come into the warehouse daily in containers, on pallets, in sacks or barrels and big bags. "We immediately carry out a quality inspection. If the storage is longer-term, our skilled staff regularly inspect the condition of both the food and packaging. If, for example, apples show bruising, then they are removed. We call that 'healthy packing'," Osse adds. And, just as in the old days, the customers are offered a range of additional services, from new or outer packaging, labelling, sorting and picking, all the way to on-time delivery, but carried out "state of the art". ■

Hamburgs Speicherstadt museum

Dockers' hooks, coffee sacks, barrels, bails and sugar sack grabbers: In the authentic setting of a warehouse built in 1888, you can see just how the warehouse keepers of the time stored, sampled and processed their high value commodities such as coffee, cocoa and rubber. Further main topics are the tea and coffee trade that was located in the Speicherstadt counting houses, and the history of building the Speicherstadt, illustrated with numerous historic photos and construction plans. www.speicherstadtmuseum.de



BIG BAGS FILLED WITH POTATOES ARE STORED UNDER OPTIMAL CLIMATIC CONDITIONS IN ONE OF THE COLD STORAGE WAREHOUSES

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